



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 5/2013:

ALASKA: HOMER, NOME AND DENALI HIGHWAY

Petri Hottola (University of Oulu, Finland & Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies)

In June-July 2012, I did an interesting triangle journey in the United States, from Alaska to Colorado to Puerto Rico, gaining 49 new species to my life list (6.525 in the end). This report deals with 13th to 22nd June, which was spent in Anchorage, Homer, Denali Highway and Nome, all also prime locations for gaining some seldom seen species on one's US list. Alaska is, after all, a world apart from the main body of the United States, and not only in regard to wildlife.

The long haul flights were made with Icelandair, with stops in Keflavik (my Iceland list currently has 12 species). The company may be recommended for reliable and economical connections across the Northern Atlantic, with the bonus of visiting Iceland, free of extra charge. I actually liked their oatmeal on board and the friendly stewardesses. The local flights in Alaska were all on Alaska Airlines, the main regional carrier. Their flights were mostly on time, without any major setbacks. Buying tickets to the smaller regional airlines remains complicated for foreigners, at least for the moment.



Fig. 1. Mountain Avens along the Denali Highway; the same species grows in Lapland, too.

This report is not going to list each and every species on my trip list. The focus is mostly on species of special interest for globetrotting birders and on up-to-date information on the sites, from a European point of view. The way I did my birding might also give ideas to local birdwatchers.

LOGISTICS

My nights were spent mostly in hotels or motels, which are expensive in Alaska. One tends to pay twice or three times more for a bed there than in other parts of the USA, especially in terms of quality. In the summer high season, any musty dump with resident alcoholics is ready to charge more than an Asian five star hotel with a fresh orchid on one's pillow might dare to do. Do not expect full value for your money but try to be happy whenever you actually find accommodation which is available close to birding sites. It pays to reserve early.

In Anchorage, my first preference was the **Royal Suites Lodge**, a place with grand name but a reality in more average category. The lodge does, however, have a good Eskimo man in charge of the reception (he preferred the term, being an Aleut, instead of Inuit). He is from the Bering Straits islands and has also spent three years in Nome, 'visiting relatives'. The problem is that the reception is not open at night and one's flight may well be late of schedule. Mine was, and I made it just on time, having called him on arrival. The airport taxi (no shuttle) was around USD 10 one way (call 7-222-232). The room cost USD 95 per night and could be reserved in the Internet.

Going north, I passed Anchorage, staying at **Eagle River Motel**. For USD 96 per night, this was a good choice; clean and with a nice manager of East Asian origin. Reservation was made by email (eaglerivermotel@gci.net). The drive to Paxon is a long one and I thought it best to start it as far north as possible. In hindsight, I should have stayed there instead of Royal Suites Lodge. The distance to the city is not that long and the level of comfort was higher at Eagle River.

In Homer, I stayed at **Driftwood Inn**, which had several different categories of rooms with shared toilet and shower facilities in the same floor. The latter arrangement worked well and the rooms were clean, comfortable and well equipped, albeit tiny. There was always space to park on the street in front of the building. The room cost USD 102 per night and could be reserved by email (driftwoodinn@alaska.com). The location was close to ideal in regard to birding sites and shopping services. If one stays at Homer Spit, the room is more expensive and the supermarkets some distance away.

At Denali Highway, Paxon, I stayed at **Denali Highway Cabins**, in a riverside tent with a bed, for USD 130. The bed itself was a comfortable one, but Audie Bakewell had promised an electric outlet, too, which was not there. I could have had that, by paying another USD 100 or so for an upgrade in a vacant cabin, but declined. As there was no compensation for the lack of outlet, and no extra value was gained by Audie's advice on birding sites for grouses (**Smith's Longspur** territories were kept secret, for obvious reasons), I would probably have been better off by staying at **Tangle River Inn** (USD 74-149).



Fig. 2. Nome, a town of memorable frontier character and residents with roots in Scandinavia.

In Nome, my lodging was at **Aurora Inn Hotel**, the best place in town run by a local Eskimo cooperative. The airport taxi cost USD 5 per head, with a minimum of USD 10 fee for the ride, and was readily available for all landings and departures. The USD 144 hotel room was expensive, comfortable and modern, all in all of much higher quality than the rest of my dwellings in Alaska.

The high prices also apply to local flights, petrol and car rental. In places like Nome, there is not much competition in these fields and the maintenance costs are high. There may also be problems on the supply side. One or two tankers per year may bring the petrol in but there is no guarantee that there is enough for everybody throughout the season. Some people do, after all, create their own reserves to make sure they themselves will not be the first ones to walk.

Having said that, I do not agree with the views of a tea party activist who had left his notes on petrol station pumps in Homer, nor his fellow believers with whom I argued while filling up my car. 'The Antichrist' (President Obama) has not caused the worldwide shortage of oil and the minor rises in its price in the USA. The current petrol prices have not taken the world on the brink of Harmageddon, either. The price they pay in Alaska is, after all, only half of the money we pay in Europe, where health care needs to be funded by taxes, supposedly to the benefit of everybody. One meets a lot of extremists in Alaska, some with supernatural wisdom in regard to global issues.

In Anchorage, I rented a Chrysler 200 at National and the car was more than adequate for its task. The highways to Homer and Denali Highway (Paxon end) varied between perfect and tolerable,

but could always be easily negotiated with the car. Well, in thick fog, it would have been nice to sit in something more substantial, in case one met an **Alaska Moose** on the road. They are huge.

In Nome, I had a Toyota 4Runner SRS, a vehicle suitable for the gravel roads of the region, for USD 119 per day with insurance. The area could have been explored in a sedan but one worries a lot less in a sturdy vehicle. Having said that, I had a flat in Nome. Fortunately, that happened right in front of the rental agency, Stampede aka Aurora Inn. I not only got the tire changed for free but there was no charge for it. An old tire had simply had one mile too many and become fractured.

Food was readily available in Anchorage, Homer and Nome. In Homer, there are several supermarkets and also a shop which had just about everything one might need at home or outdoors, including large cans of bear maze and various powerful hand guns. For the Denali Highway, it is better to stock up, for example at Glenallen, which is a logical place to fill the petrol tank, as well. In there, lines at the petrol stations may periodically become long. As far as I was able to judge, the Hansen supermarket was the best store in Nome, with a petrol station close to it (USD 5.65 per gallon). The price and selection of groceries was as expected for a remote location supplied by flights and the occasional shipment, a bit like in our Lapland.

Scope is essential in Alaska, with its vast open spaces and, in particular, seawatching potential. A reasonably heavy and adjustable tripod helps on windy days. With binoculars, one's auklet list is bound to be rather short, even though two species of these cute fellows were feeding right by the shoreline at Homer Spit, and some **Parakeet Auklets** flew very close to shoreline in Nome.

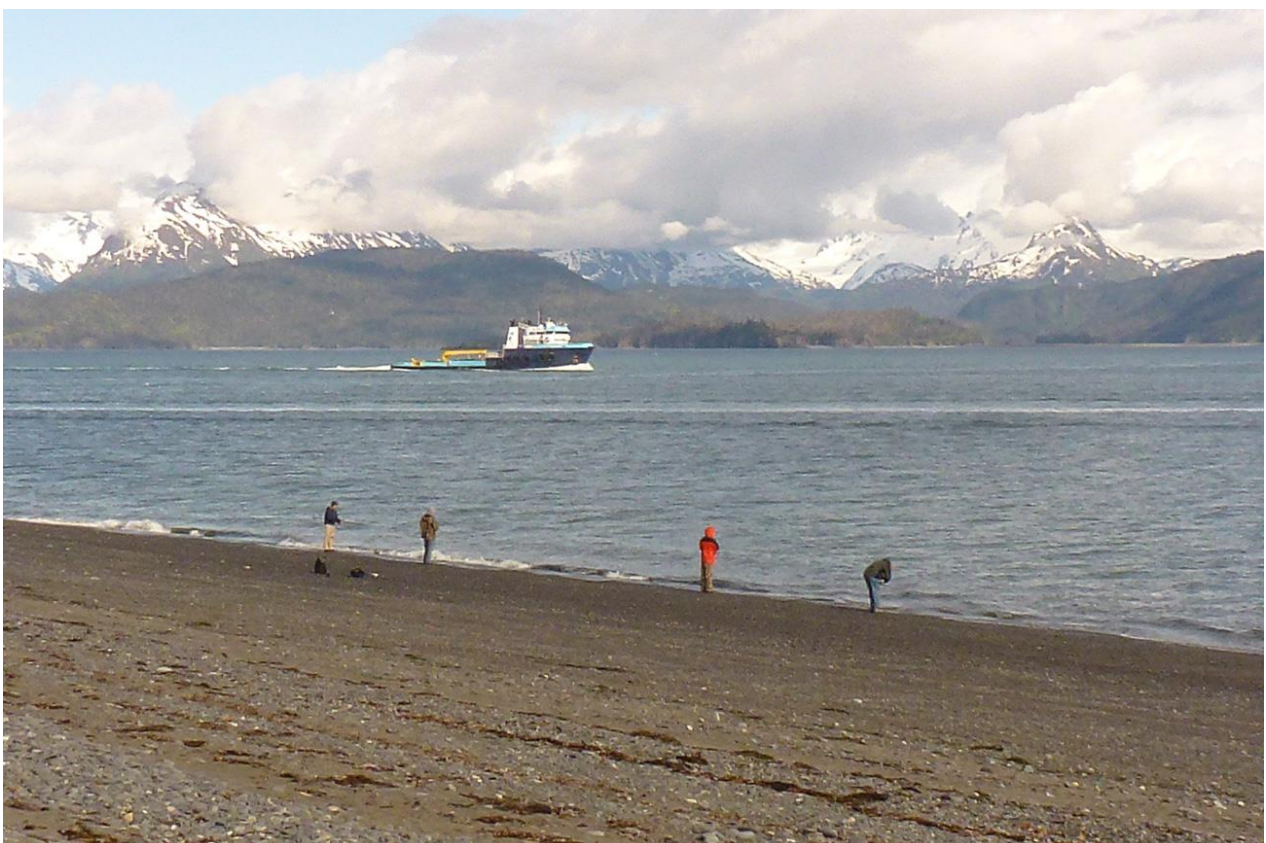


Fig. 3. A view from the Homer Spit observation point.

SITES AND BIRDS

ALONG THE HIGHWAY TO HOMER

Potter Marsh

The current access is right along the main coastal highway, the new Seaward Highway to Homer (skip the Rabbit Creek Rd), soon after one leaves Anchorage. There are boardwalks and observation platforms, and a toilet, at the Anchorage end of the marsh. At the opposite end, there is space to park off the highway. The marsh had a good selection of wildfowl and shorebirds (e.g. **Red-necked Phalaropes** and *caurinus* **Short-billed Dowitchers**), and **Sandhill Cranes** hunting their chicks, **Cackling Canada Geese**, and the first of the three **Rusty Blackbirds** of my visit, the others also being seen along the road to Homer. Among the other passerines, territorial **Alder Flycatchers** and more than one thousand **Violet-green Swallows** deserve a mention. It was a pleasant start for birding in Alaska.



Fig, 4. Potter Marsh, a wetland just south of Anchorage, along the Seaward Highway.

Crow Creek Rd

Great forest with many **Varied Thrushes** but too much local traffic for roadside birding. I had no time to do the trails. Two visits were made to look for **Ruffed** and **Spruce Grouse**, and woodpeckers. The best discoveries were a **White-winged Crossbill** and a **Rufous Hummingbird**.

Lake Tustumena Road

The boat landing and a campsite in the end of the road had a public lavatory, the calls of **Great Northern Divers** creating a nice atmosphere for the toilet sessions. The lake itself had breeding **Bonaparte's Gulls**, among other species. No **Spruce Grouse**, which I was looking for, despite two visits and the road's reputation for them, but nevertheless an interesting and peaceful gravel track with bird potential, and a few mammals to observe. Among the passerines, an **Olive-sided Flycatcher** probably was the best one, in addition to **Boreal Chickadees**. (I also checked out a number of other gravel roads in the general area, in vain).



Fig. 5. My first **American Porcupine**, at Lake Tustumena Road.

Anchor Point

Drive to the Kyllonen RV Park (originally in Finland, Kyllönen) and forward to the seashore, to the boat landing which parking lot had vacant space on all of my three visits. This apparently is the westernmost point of the US highway system. My first two **Aleutian Terns**, a species missing in Homer for some reason (went to the airport site, too), were seen there, before fog made observations impossible on the first visit. A **Sooty Shearwater** was also recorded once. Alcids were always present in small numbers: dozens of **Common Guillemots**, a single **Horned Puffin** and five **Tufted Puffins**. People feed **Bald Eagles** here with fish and there are dozens of them on the shore by the parking lot. Up to 50 were counted at once. All in all, the site clearly is not as good for seawatching as the Homer Spit, but Anchor Point is nevertheless worth a stop when driving the highway.



Fig. 6. Bald Eagles and Glaucous-winged Gulls congregate at the Anchor Point shoreline.

HOMER

Homer Spit

It is there where I spent a total of 15 hours in two and half days for intensive seawatching, sitting with my scope on driftwood on a gravel embankment above the shoreline, between the Land's End Resort and a neighboring building. I went there at 6.30 AM for a morning observations and did another round late in the afternoon, towards the evening. Fortunately, it was overcast with periodical drizzle for the most of the time, with clear visibility across the fjord. With my winter underwear, a Norwegian woolen pullover, ski mask, gloves and socks, and a rain poncho, I found the conditions rather comfortable. There is no need to park at the ferry harbor if it is just a car or two. Drive all the way to the end and you will find public space between the private parking areas.

(The US birders I met on the shore were mostly walking around, chatting and having an occasional look with their bins or scopes, without any focused effort on seabirds, even though most of them were looking for the same birds as I was, according to the talks we had. It may not be difficult to guess who scored and who did not...)

The traffic of **Common Guillemots** was periodically heavy, with a total of 7.000 counted, among which only two **Thick-billed** were recorded. **Pigeon Guillemots** were common, but not numerous, with a total of 34 birds. **Tufted** and **Horned Puffins** were surprisingly scarce, even though the odd birds were seen very close, with totals of 13 and 6, respectively.

The variety of auklets, on the other hand, was surprisingly good. In addition to the many unidentified ones, 220 **Kittlitz Murrelets**, 250 **Marbled Murrelets**, one **Ancient Murrelet** and one **Cassin's Auklet** were identified, with some interesting variety of transitional plumages among the first two species. Surprisingly, two **Parakeet Auklets** passed the observation point on the 13th of June and another three on the 14th, at close range, and a single **Least Auklet** was also seen on the 14th. There had been thick fog (a risk for a short visit) over the coast for couple of days before my arrival and that may explain some of the observations. On the other hand, all alcids should

periodically visit the large fjords in small numbers. No **Long-billed Murrelets**, however, which have also been around.

Among the other birds recorded during the seawatching sessions, the most memorable included two **Red-faced Cormorants**, two **Sooty Shearwaters**, two **Slaty-backed Gulls**, both immature, and the many resident **Kittiwakes** (no immature **Red-legged!**) and **Northwestern Crows** of the Homer Spit. One of the latter had an abnormally long beak. **Glaucous-winged Gull** is the dominant gull species on the southern coast. No **Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels**, unfortunately, to my frustration after such an intensive effort.



Fig. 7. One of the several **Northwestern Crows** at the end of the Homer Spit.

Beluga Lake

It is the lake one needs to cross when driving to the Homer Spit. It had a single **Red-necked Grebe** but otherwise only common waterfowl such as **Greater Scaup**.

East End Road

I drove the road twice, trying to find access to forested areas with potential for **Spruce Grouse** and **Hawk Owl**, the latter in need for my US list. The best roads (e.g. Unity Rd) would have required a 4x4. Nothing special was seen during the visits. (**Common Pheasants!**)

DENALI HIGHWAY

Side roads around Glenallen and before Paxon

Desperate to score with the missing **Ruffed** and **Spruce Grouse**, and **Black-backed Woodpecker**, I checked about 15 side tracks on the way, driving back to Anchorage. As good as the habitats appeared to be, 2012 was a bad year for the grouses and I scored nothing. I may have 600 species on my US list but not these supposedly common birds, despite a number of searches during the years. For some reason, the locals tend to say: “you don’t find the grouses, they find you”, being unable to point any productive locations. I find this a mystery. In Finland, it is no problem to list sites which have reliable **Hazel Grouse**, **Black Grouse** and **Capercaillie**. I suspect the locals do not know their territory too well, after all. There is plenty of forest in Alaska.

The small lakes visible to the highway were more productive, adding several waterfowl species to the trip list, such as **Bufflehead**, **Ring-necked Duck** and **Lesser Scaup**. The roadside **Harlan’s Hawks** were also interesting (a form of **Red-tailed Hawk**).



Fig. 8. Matanuska Glacier, along the Glenn Highway between Palmer and Glenallen, towards Paxon.

Paxon

For the missing grouses, Audie Bakewell pointed me to two areas in Paxon. Opposite Denali Highway Cabins, across the Gulkana River, there is a large gravel pit (left). Beyond it, there are many trails and some tracks in the forest bordered by the river on the other side. Furthermore, there had not been any **Grizzly Bears** around in June 2012. In good years, grouses like the area. I went there twice, meeting only common (but nice) birds such as **Grey Jays** and **Boreal Chickadees**.

On the second visit, I decided to leave the 'safe area'. While walking further and further away from the gravel pit, the forest started to feel increasingly threatening. Observing piles of **Grizzly** excrement on the ground I could not help a profound thought: Could it be so that if I checked one thicket too many for the **Ruffed Grouse**, I could become one of those piles on the ground? In the region, it is a good idea to consult the locals before venturing too far into the forest. Territorial **Grizzlies** are often known by them.

About four kilometers south of Paxon, by the first views of the Paxon Lake, a side track which appears more substantial than the others ascends east to the top of a small mountain with a radio mast, the 'Radio Hill'. It is also an Alaska Oil Pipeline maintenance road. This is another site where the grouses are occasionally seen by Audie and I therefore went there three times. Again, **Grey Jays**, a male **Pine Grosbeak**, a **Blackpoll Warbler** and some more common birds, and several porcupines and caribous, but no score. The Paxon Lake had four **Trumpeter Swans**.



Fig. 9. A **Gray Jay**, a characteristic inhabitant of the northern forests, on the Paxon 'Radio Hill'.



Fig. 10. I could admire scenes like this forever: a view on the highway to Paxon, north of Glenallen.

The Highway

The wilderness highway between Paxon and Denali (Mt. McKinley) National Park is called the Denali Highway. Along the highway, west of Paxon, some of the roadside lakes had the odd **Trumpeter Swans**, among the more common wildfowl. At Tangle Lakes, a drake **Barrow's Goldeneye** was spotted. The few shorebirds recorded in the tundra included more than 50 **Red-necked Phalaropes** (e.g. M17 ponds), **Spotted Sandpipers**, **Hudsonian Whimbrels** and **Semipalmated Plovers**. **Long-tailed Skuas** were common. A **Willow Grouse** was standing on the road and its cousins were heard a few times. An adult **Peregrine** patrolled the tundra.

Among the passerines, the local star species is **Smith's Longspur**, the very reason why most of us visit the Denali Highway in mid-June. Any time of the day appeared equally good for the species. At M13 I heard a singing male and eventually saw it closely, but fleetingly. Other males were heard at M17 and M19.5 but they proved to be exceedingly difficult to see. Amazingly, there were no **Lapland Longspurs** in the habitats ideal for them, if judged by the standards of Finnish Lapland! The other interesting passerines included breeding **American Pipits**, **Boreal Chickadees**, a **Siberian Tit**, **Arctic Warblers** (only few) and **Blackpoll Warblers**, in addition to a dozen of other passerine species.



Fig. 11. The Denali Highway, between Paxson and Tangle Lakes, in **Smith's Longspur** habitat.



Fig. 12. The Tangle Lakes; better than a painting.

NOME

Kotzebue

The Alaska Airlines flight to Nome stops in Kotzebue, apparently also to estimate if the weather (fogs occur) is likely to allow the last leg. At the Kotzebue Airport, one stays on board, but it is possible to see some sea ducks by the runway. More importantly, the landing gives a comprehensive view of the ice situation in the Bering Straits. Going in, the sea was covered by ice. Going out, most of it had already disappeared, in just few days. The locals are keen to chat and delivered some local news. Our plane had three US Marshalls on board because the day before, there had been a shooting incident by the runway, with three dead, two policemen included.



Fig. 13. Ice has almost disappeared in the Bering Straits, on the 22nd June 2012.

The Spectacled Eider Project

The species in Alaska I had dreamed about for three decades, after spotting it in one of my first field guides for Europe, Middle East and North Africa, was **Spectacled Eider**. It has once been seen as a vagrant in northern Norway, where I have traveled about 15 times to observe seabirds, but the eider is exceedingly rare in Europe. Overall, more than any other species, I wanted to see this one. Nevertheless, I had skipped Barrow in favor of Nome. Nome simply had the best combination of species and Spectacled Eiders had been seen there in June, on a relatively regular basis.

Having seen on my 10+ US visits how 'rare' becomes 'uncommon', and 'uncommon' 'common', whenever European birders arrive in the scene, I trusted that I had a fair chance to see the species in Nome. (No disrespect to US birders. It is just so that an average globetrotting birder tends to be more experienced and goal-oriented than the majority of resident birdwatchers, particularly in a nation of 70 million people with interest in observing the birds).

I was not disappointed in my expectations. A focused effort in observing, counting and identifying the (post-breeding?) seabirds, which migrated west along the Bering Sea coast, proved to be both productive and interesting. I have no idea to which degree the situation in Nome in June 2012 reflected the normal way of things, recent weather conditions or the progress of melting of the ice cover in the Bering Straits.

Between 18th and 22th June, I did seawatching on a daily basis, at M18 'Neck' and other sites on the seaside Safety Lagoon, and in Teller, for a total of 39 hours. M18 became the favorite because of three features: 1. the strip of land between the lagoon and the sea is very narrow there, 2. allowing good views both to the resident birds of the lagoon, and 3. the migratory seabirds which passed close to the shore there, with resting flocks of eiders as an icing on the cake. Another particularly good spot was just after the Safety Channel Bridge.

In the morning, I normally started at 6.30 AM and stopped around 10 AM, when things begun to get slow, with more discontinuous observations later during the day. My Swarovski 80 mm HD scope with a 30x fixed WWA ocular fitted extremely well in scanning of the migrating flocks, many of them quite close to the shoreline, following it. I prefer to use such oculars rather than the zoom ones because of their higher performance and wider field of view, ideal for detailed views of moving objects.

Spectacled Eiders were seen twice (5): On the 21st June, after more than three days of relentless search, a group of a single drake and three females migrated west along the shore at M25 of Safety Lagoon road. The next morning, another drake was stationary at M18, before it took off to west at 7.15 AM.

King Eiders were more common (22), with a stationary party of 6 and 5 and 3 migrating birds on the 20th (SS), another party of 8 birds migrating west at M18 the next day, and one drake at M18 on the 22nd. A lone **Steller's Eider** was seen, also migrating together with **Common Eiders**, on the 18th (SS). The best morning, on the 20th June, had 160 *v-nigrum* **Common Eiders** flying west in three hours at Safety Sound, in addition to the resident birds (about 200 in total).

In regard to larger alcids, **Common Guillemot** was the most numerous species. Between 300 and 500 birds were seen at Safety Sound on each morning, together with 3 to 8 **Thick-billed Guillemots** (up to 30 off Teller). **Horned** and **Tufted Puffins** were common and were frequently seen at Safety Sound, in most cases flying west, the latter in relatively small numbers. The highest counts for each species were 90 and 8, respectively, on the 20th and 21st June. **Black Guillemonts** were also regularly seen, with a total of 15 birds, all of them migrating. **Pigeon Guillemots** were scarcer, with a total of three individuals in Teller and at Safety Sound.

Contrary to my expectations, based on US trip reports in the Internet, small alcids were also more than well present at Safety Sound. Seawatching revealed large flocks of **Crested Auklets**, moving north, right from the beginning, with a trip total of 600+ individuals, plus thousands of unidentified dark auklets in thick, far away flocks. The handsome **Parakeet Auklets** were also regular in smaller numbers, with a total of exactly 100 birds, and even **Least Auklets** were seen at close range in three occasions, altogether 6 birds.

All in all, the endless hours of scanning the sea were highly rewarding. One never knows what might turn out. I did not see any **Sabine's Gulls** and missed an **Ivory Gull** seen by others, but nevertheless saw more than I expected. The local birdwatchers I saw by the seashore, seldom appeared to focus on the sea for more than few minutes at time. They also were completely absent early in the morning, when the main alcid and eider movements occurred. Later on, I helped them to locate the resting **King Eiders** and other nice species.



Fig. 14. An adult **Emperor Goose** at Safety Sound, foraging on the seashore.

In regard to divers, **Red-throated** and **Pacific Divers** were common in Nome, the Safety Lagoon area and Teller. **Black-throated** and **Ivory-billed Divers** were also seen on a daily basis, up to four of the former and one or two of the latter, the best areas being before and after the Safety Channel Bridge, just before Bonanza Channel and at Cape Nome.

Another 'must' species, the **Emperor Goose**, was spotted at Safety Sound on three occasions. First, an obliging individual was foraging on the seashore on the 18th (around M23). Then, two birds flew east with **Black Brants**, on the 20th. Third, a lone bird flew west at M18, on the 22nd. All the birds

were on the seaside of the Safety Lagoon – Cape Nome area. One does not see them every day but three days should be enough to score.

Other assorted species seen at Safety Sound included two splendid **Pomarine Skuas** in their full breeding regalia, **Arctic Skuas**, **Black Brants**, a smattering of sea ducks (**American Black** and **Velvet Scoters**, **Surf Scoters**, **Long-tailed** and **Harlequin Ducks**, **Red-breasted Mergansers**), **Pelagic Cormorants**, a party of five migrating **Red-necked Grebes** and large numbers of **Kittiwakes** and other gulls and terns moving along the coast. The few **Snow Buntings** of the season were also seen by the shoreline, at M18 for example. No **McKay's**, which could theoretically occur in June.

Safety Lagoon

The huge Safety Lagoon has such a variety and numbers of birds that one never feels like having seen it all, even after a full day there. There were several particularly good areas in the lagoon, around M18 and Bonanza Channel, and around the Safety Channel Bridge, for example. The first area had several hundreds of waterfowl, including the resident rarities of **Eurasian Wigeons**, **Tufted Ducks** and a lone male **Canvasback**.

A pair of **Caspian Terns** also stopped there, early in the morning (6.30 AM) of June the 21st. **Long-tailed Skuas** had their nesting area behind the lagoon. Once, a stunning female **Red Phalarope** was discovered at a small roadside pond, a short distance towards Nome. There were hundreds of **Tundra Swans** and **Black Brants**, together with a few dozen **Trumpeter Swans**, **Snow Geese** and the odd **Cackling Goose**.

The Bonanza Channel area, both sides of the bridge, was especially good for shorebirds, including **Red-necked Stints**, a rare species on the eastern side of the Bering Straits, and **Dunlins**. Overall, the area had numerous breeding **Baird's**, **Semipalmated**, **Western** and **Pectoral Sandpipers** (fewer than the rest). **Black Turnstones** were presents, but scarce. **Red-necked Phalaropes**, on the other hand, were common. **Semipalmated Plovers** were also seen, together with **American Golden Plovers** (by the Nome road). **Bar-tailed Godwits** were encountered twice, three and one individuals. The species is a rare breeder on the US soil.

Glaucous Gull is the most abundant gull species at the Lagoon, followed by **Mew/Short-billed Gull**. The rare gulls included two **Vega Gulls** and one **Slaty-backed Gull**. The bridge area was particularly good for **Aleutian Terns**, which could be seen there and in some other parts of the lagoon any time of the day. Among the few dozen passerines of about ten species, **Lapland Longspurs** caught my eyes most often, many males holding territory along the Safety Lagoon road. Single **Eastern Yellow Wagtails** was seen a few times and **Hoary Redpolls** were here and there, together with **Common Redpolls**.



Fig. 15. An **Aleutian Tern**, a breeding regional endemic.



Fig. 16. **Semipalmated Sandpiper** is a very common species at Safety Lagoon.



Fig. 17. Gold rush dreams, broken down at Bonanza Channel...

Teller Road

The dusty road from Nome to Teller needs to be made at least once, snow permitting (it normally does, in mid-June). I went to Teller in fog (too foggy for Safety Sound), starting at 4.30 AM, and returned in sunny afternoon weather. There is plenty to see along the road itself, as my first stop on a large bridge (under repairs in June 2012) over a river witnessed: there was a **Bluethroat** singing in the riverside bush and a **Bristle-thighed Curlew** flew in from the tundra, to feed at the river. A total of 14 **Arctic Warblers** held territories by the road, actively singing on top of low bushes. The subspecies *kennicotti* apparently still has some split potential.

(At Aurora Inn, two visiting US birders complained for not seeing a single Arctic Warbler in a week in Nome whereas others had seen them everywhere. It helps to know the song which, however, has superficial resemblance to that of **Dark-eyed Junco**, also present in smaller numbers).

Eastern Yellow Wagtails commonly occur along streams and seaside ponds, from about half way to Teller. I saw 20+ individuals. **Willow Grouses** are common and **Rock Ptarmigans** were present in the obvious stony area before Teller. A lone **Rough-legged Buzzard** hunted voles on the mountains. **Wilson's Snipes** made territorial displays at three sites (also seen at Safety Lagoon). The odd passerines included, among others, an **American Pipit** and a number of both **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, **Hoary Redpolls**, one **Snow Bunting** and hundreds of **Lapland Longspurs**.

In Teller, most birds were seen by the ponds and seashore just before the Inupiat (Inuits!) village, or at the mouth of the Port Clarence Channel. These constituted mainly a variety of shorebirds, including a **Black Turnstone** and **Red-necked Phalaropes**. The best bird was a lone **Vega Gull**. The gravel spit reaches far from the village and may easily be driven all the way by a 4x4. There is a well-used track for this and space for parking at the end. Judging by the otter, divers, cormorants and larger alcids present there, the channel must be a particularly good spot for fishing. Just before Teller, there is another small village, below which is a boat harbor and Coyote Creek, a good site for gulls and shorebirds. It is possible to drive there through the settlement. In both places, people were friendly towards a lone foreign visitor. One could see that the villages were more geared to winter activities, the many dogs being clearly frustrated while waiting for another season of ice, snow and Northern Lights.

Woolley Lagoon

The road to Woolley Lagoon leaves the Teller Road around M39 from Nome. The access track is good for **Long-tailed Skuas** and a local speciality, **Northern Wheatear** (5). The general area has three breeding species of *Pluvialis* **Plovers**: **American Golden**, **Pacific Golden** and **Black-bellied**. At the end of the track, there is a huge area of coastal lagoons and waterways but wandering around may not be a good idea; bears may be anywhere. There are many shorebirds around. I saw my only **Rock Sandpiper** there, and a party of three **White Wagtails** by the shoreline. In order to see the sea, one needs to ferry across a narrow channel, by a boat reserved for the task.



Fig. 18. An elegant **Long-tailed Skua**, at Woolley Lagoon access road.

Kalgorak Road

This is another road from Nome to inland, as underlined in the photocopied birding route maps available at Aurora Inn. It is mainly known for a breeding site of **Bristle-thighed Curlew**, where most visitors twitched the species. I had no such need, having seen the species on Teller Road (and dozens more on Pacific Islands), but nevertheless made one short and relatively aimless afternoon visit to the area to get more species on my year list. I failed with **Gyrfalcons** (found two in Finland in October), which are normally there, but saw other species: e.g. an **American Harrier**, a **Golden Eagle**, an **Eastern Yellow Wagtail**, a **Bluethroat**, at least 10 **Arctic Warblers**, **Hoary Redpolls**, a **Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch** and a few dozen **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**.



Fig. 19. Summer flowers along the Kalgorak Road. Late June is the best time to visit the tundra.

MAMMALS

Alaska is great for mammals, too, and a number of species were encountered on the road, even though I made no specific attempt to see any of them, with the exception of **Musk Ox**. The **Oxen** were readily seen in the western and northern outskirts of Nome (50+), probably looking for their 'favorite enemies', dogs. If a dog is spotted, a **Musk Ox** will not give up until the annoyance has been dealt with. Others saw them along the Teller Road, too. The species is a reintroduction in Alaska, having lived there for ages but been later exterminated by humans before the mistake was corrected by wildlife authorities in 1935.

Moose was the most common large mammal encountered in the field, seen a few times on each day between Homer and Paxon. On the Homer road, a sign showed the number of **Moose** roadkills in 2012. A few people probably have died in these hundreds of accidents, too. On the Denali Highway, one male started to follow me in aggressive way, after it caught an unidentified glimpse of something hiding in the bush, me looking for the **Smith's Longspurs**. **Barren Ground Caribous** were seen along the Denali Highway and at the Paxon 'Radio Hill'. In regard to **Grizzly** and other bears, I only found footprints and piles of excrement. This was a disappointment but, on the other hand, having had several close encounters with **Brown Bears** in Finland, I am not quite sure I would really have liked to duplicate them with **Grizzlies**, which are known to be more aggressive.

The first **American Porcupine** looked like a monkey in a tree along the Lake Tustumena access road. The best site for them was the Paxon 'Radio Hill', which had up to four individuals on the gravel road. **Sea Otters** were common in Homer and constantly seen at the Spit, up to 20 individuals at time, whereas a **Northern River Otter** could be observed at Teller. **Snowshoe Hares**, a species I had become familiar as a boy when reading Jack London's Yukon novels, were spotted at Lake Tustumena Road, with two **Coyotes** hunting them, and at Homer Spit. A **Tundra Hare** was seen along the East End Road, Homer, and an **American Red Fox** along the Teller Road.

A **Red Squirrel**, on the other hand, was at Crow Creek Road, and **Arctic Ground Squirrels** at Denali Highway, and on Teller and Kalgorak Roads. A **Northern Red-backed Vole** was added to the list close to the 'Radio Hill', Paxon, and a **Tundra Vole** at Safety Lagoon, Nome. Among the lemmings, a **Collared Lemming** crossed the Teller Road and **Brown Lemmings** were closely observed at Safety Sound sea-observation points, feasting on the abundant summer grass. In regard to sea mammals, a **Minke Whale** represented the whales both at Homer Spit and Safety Sound. **Northern Sea Lions** were seen in Homer. **Spotted** (also off Teller), **Harbor** and **Bearded Seals** were recorded at Safety Sound.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Alaska definitely is worth a visit for birding and mammal spotting, and for observing the local way of life, not to mention the often majestic wilderness scenery. I loved every minute of it and would have liked to stay for another month or a year. The region had many similarities with Arctic Norway, closer to the Pole but warmed by the Golf Current, but it also had a feeling of being somewhere substantially more remote, with diverse wildlife. I wish Attu Island was still open for traveling birders. The island would certainly attract some of us foreigners as well, for once in a lifetime visit to see Eurasian birds within the political limits of North America.





Fig. 20. SNIFF... HRMMHH....SNIFFF...I believe A DOG has passed here! Red Alert!!!



Fig. 21. Next time in Barrow, for **Snowy Owls** and **Polar Bears**?